

...that Europe's largest internal armed conflict is in Russia's North Caucasus, particularly Dagestan and Chechnya? □

The conflict in Russia's North Caucasus region is the largest internal armed conflict in Europe, pitting Russian government forces against armed insurgents -- many of whom seek a regional Shari'ah-based political unit. The fighting has had a devastating impact on not only the lives of civilians but also religious freedom throughout the region.

Since the late 1990's, observers report that the Salafist form of Islam has been spreading in the North Caucasus, particularly in Dagestan. Its growth is influenced by the negative official treatment of conservative Muslims, local traditions of religion and ethnicity, ties to the Chechen conflict, and the roles of local religious leaders. Most local Salafis are peaceful, but face a difficult integration into local societies and economies. In Dagestan, the North Caucasus' most violent region, Salafi communities are banned, but the local government has initiated an effort to build social consensus on Islam. That initiative, however, may have been hindered by the August 2012 murder of Said Afandi Atsayev, a key local Sufi leader. Three individuals were arrested in December 2012 for their alleged assistance to the female suicide attacker.

Chechnya's Kremlin-appointed president, Ramzan Kadyrov, oversees mass human rights violations, including of religious freedom. He distorts Chechen Sufi traditions to justify his rule, instituted a repressive state based on his personal religious *diktat*, and has ordered the wearing of the Islamic headscarf in public buildings. Kadyrov has praised the murders of at least nine women for "immodest behavior" since 2008; the killers have not stood trial. Kadyrov and his men stand accused of murders, tortures, and disappearances of opponents and human rights activists in Russia and abroad. By early 2013, the ECtHR issued over 210 rulings against Russia for human rights violations in its counter-insurgency campaign in Chechnya. Since the

start of the conflict, some 160,000 Chechens have been given refugee status in Europe.

Another North Caucasus republic, Kabardino-Balkaria, was the site of a popular conflict in 2005, partly due to the closure of all mosques in its capital, Nalchik. USCIRF recently has received reports of maltreatment of prisoners sentenced for their alleged role in those events. Rustam Matsev, a lawyer who has defended the Nalchik prisoners, allegedly received death threats in June 2012.